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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

*Ethnonyms in Europe and Asia:
Studies in History and Anthropology*

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Ethnonyms in Europe and Asia: Studies in History and Anthropology

Zsuzsanna Zsidai
Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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Some Thoughts on the Translation and Interpretation of Terms Describing Turkic Peoples in Medieval Arabic Sources^{*}

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The identification of the various peoples who lived on the medieval Eurasian Steppe has always been an engaging problem among scholars of the early history of this territory. The Arabs came into contact with Central Asian peoples from the beginning in the seventh century, during the course of the Islamic conquest. Hence, one finds many details about the peoples of the Steppe in the Arabic sources.

The Arabic geographer Ibn Rusta mentions the Hungarians among the Turkic peoples in the beginning of the tenth century. However, according to the Arabic sources, there were many Turkic tribes or peoples in different regions, such in Ferghana, Khorasan, Transoxania, Samarkand, and near Armenia. Based on this fact, the term “Turk” can be interpreted in different ways. My aim is to indicate some of the difficulties concerning the translation and interpretation of the terms referring to peoples or tribes, such as “jins” and “qawm,” and to give some examples of occurrences of the ethnonym “Turk” in medieval Arabic texts.

I begin with a discussion of the relevant methodological questions and then argue that the designation “Turk” should be used more cautiously as a group-identifying term in the wider context of the early Medieval world of the Eurasian Steppe.

Keywords: Turks, ethnonyms, Eurasia, Arabic sources

Introduction

The Arabs conquered Central Asia in several waves of attacks and finally overthrew the Chinese forces at the Talas river in 751, so they annexed Transoxania to the Caliphate. First, one must highlight the importance of contacts between various peoples and cultures in Eurasia and the long-durée changes that shaped the history of the region. However, this would go beyond the framework of this paper. We can find traces of the meeting of Arab and Eurasian peoples and cultures in the archaeological heritage but also in the medieval Islamic geographical and historical literature. These sources contain

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very important information about the early medieval history of these territories and their peoples, but one must keep in mind that, if we seek to arrive at an understanding of the wider context of the region's history, we need to consider the Turkic, Chinese, Uighur, and Persian sources as well.¹ Many of the Steppe peoples who lived in different regions (such in Ferghana, Khorasan, Transoxania, Samarkand, and near Armenia), are referred to as Turks in the Medieval Islamic texts. It is therefore sometimes difficult to identify the various “Turkic” peoples in the sources. My research focuses on early Hungarian history (by which I mean the period before the eleventh century), to which this issue is relevant because the Hungarians were referred to in the sources primarily as Turks, but the “Turk problem” is a very important and fascinating question in the wider context of the world of the early Medieval Eurasian steppe too. In the following, I would like to emphasize that as an Arabist, I will examine these questions on the basis of Arabic sources exclusively. One must begin with the first question: who were the peoples referred to as Turks in the sources, and which parts of the Steppe did they inhabit?

If we speak of Turkic peoples, even if we take into consideration their skills in military affairs and their emergence into the politics of the Islamic caliphate during the centuries following the Arabic conquest, it is interesting to see how the nomadic, barbarian, and pagan Turkic peoples became the defenders of Islam and the Caliphate. Yehoshua Frenkel correctly points out that the image of the Turks has changed over time, and he assumes that descriptions of the Turks in Arabic sources can be divided into two main periods, the early stage contacts (ca. 650–830, when the peoples of the Steppe were characterized as barbarians) and the later period (830–1055), during which their image evolved into that of the noble savage.² He analyzes the second period in his article using a wide array of sources. His examinations and recent translations³ of texts about the Turkic peoples are very important and highly valuable, giving some insights into their history and showing their main characteristics in the medieval Arabic texts. Nevertheless, many questions remain concerning shifts in the descriptions of the Turks in the Arabic sources. Hopefully, future studies will pay attention to this subject as regards the early Islamic age, too.

1 On this problem, see for example: Czeglédy, “A török népek és nyelvek.”

2 Frenkel, “The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes in Medieval Arabic Writings,” 234.

3 Idem, *The Turkic Peoples in Medieval Arabic Writings*.

The Question of Group-identifying Terms

Before speaking of the problem of the identification of these peoples,⁴ one must raise questions related to the usefulness and limitations of group-identifying terms in general. This is a very complex problem, which concerns not only the translation of words, but also interpretations which are subjects of the fields of history and anthropology. If one reads about Turkic or any other kinds of peoples in the Medieval Arabic geographical or historical works, one finds many expressions and sentences resembling the following two examples:

“at-turk ummatun ‘azimatu kathiratu al-ajnāsi wa al-anwā‘i kathiratu al-qabā’ila wa’l-afkādhi”

“The Turks are a great people and consist of many kinds and varieties, many tribes and sub-tribes”;⁵ (Trans. Minorsky)

*“wa fihi aydan jinsun min al-ṣaqālība”*⁶ (“and [in the Caucasus] [dwells] a kind of Slavic peoples too”). *“Wa’l-majghariyya jinsun min al-turk”*⁷ (“The Hungarians are a kind of Turkic people”).

But the question arises, which social/ethnic groups/tribes or peoples are mentioned among the Turkic peoples by the authors?⁸ When reading about the early Hungarians or any other kind of Turkic peoples, this can be confusing, even if one keeps in mind that the identification of ethnicity is another general issue.⁹ In order to further an examination of the categories of “Turkic” peoples, it is essential to consider the interpretation of the word “jins,” and other terms which are used in the medieval Arabic texts to designate peoples or tribes should also be interrogated. I list the most specific terms found in the sources.

I would like to begin by emphasizing that a full discussion of the problem of “tribes” lies beyond the scope of my research and this paper. However, it is important to summarize the main methodological questions, which are strongly connected with the focus of this inquiry, namely the questions relating to translations and interpretations of words and terms designating various social

4 On the possible types of identification of early medieval ethnic communities in general see: Pohl and Reimitz, *Strategies of Distinction*.

5 al-Marwazī, *Sharaf al-ṣamān*, *17, and the English translation on 29.

6 Ibn al-Faḥr al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-buldan*, 295.

7 Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a‘lāq an-nafisa*, 142.

8 On the problem of the early Hungarian social/ethnic group/tribe, see recently Szabados, *Állam és etnosság a IX–X. századi magyar történelemben*.

9 On the subject of ethnicity in general see: Pohl, “Conceptions of Ethnicity.”

groups in our written sources. The problem of tribe and its translations may be too broad and complicated in part because it demands interdisciplinary work from the fields of philology, anthropology, and history, which would be a complex undertaking.¹⁰ It has become almost a commonplace in anthropology that the main problem of the tribe is that it is a “magical word,”¹¹ and it is hard, if not impossible, to define what it means exactly.¹² The meaning of “tribe” can be quite different and can shift over time, depending on a wide variety of factors, such as territory, the exact period of time in question, or the origins of the author and whether or not the term is used to denote a particular fluid society.¹³ This also means that in most cases, it is difficult to translate and interpret the terms or nouns describing groups, peoples, or tribes, and in some ways, the mapping of these social groups, if they can be mapped at all, is strongly connected with the ethnographers’ (or translators’) fictions.¹⁴ Despite the serious methodological issues, it might be worth taking into consideration the anthropologists’ notes and considering how their findings could be used in historical research. Of course, many methodological problems arise, for instance the question of extrapolation of sources,¹⁵ such as the case of the word “īlāt.” This word has been applied to the tribal, pastoral, nomadic population, but it is not found in the medieval Persian records.¹⁶

Surprisingly, it was social anthropologist David Sneath who raised the problem of the interpretation of these terms some years ago and suggested that “specialists in other fields” should think about the problem of translations.¹⁷ While Sneath is not a philologist, he recognized this fundamental issue concerning the Mongol era and Persian texts, and he found that the word “qawm” in Rashīd al-Dīn’s

10 Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians,” 48–49.

11 Southall, “Tribes,” 1329.

12 Sneath, “Ayimag, uymaq and baylik: Re-examining Notions of the Nomadic Tribe and State,” 163; Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians,” 49–51. On the Middle Eastern terminology of tribes see also Kraus, *Islamische Stammesgesellschaften*, 125–27.

13 Johann Heiss and Eirik Hodsen also highlighted the problem of fluid social groups and the changes in the meanings of these terms. Heiss and Hovden, “The Political Usage of Religious and Non-Religious Terms for Community in Medieval South Arabia.”

14 Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians,” 49–51; Southall, “Tribes,” 1333.

15 On the problem of extrapolation, see for example: Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians,” 60; and on the continuity of the “timeless traditional nomadic society” see Sneath, “Imperial Statecraft: Arts of Power on the Steppe,” 2.

16 Paul, “Terms for nomads in medieval Persian historiography,” 438.

17 Sneath, “Ayimag, uymaq and baylik,” 161.

work does not mean “tribe” or “lineage.”¹⁸ With regards to the interpretation of group-identifying terms, I assume that his arguments are persuasive. Christopher P. Atwood also emphasizes that there is no comprehensive study of the terms used to designate various groups in Rashīd al-Dīn’s work. For example, the word “qawm” seems to be regularly applied to any Turco-Mongol social group, so it is not possible to specify its meaning. At the same time, he points at the difficulties of the simultaneous usage that were common with reference to the interpretation of his material as ethnographical research into the Pre-Chinggisid Mongols, which is a very important observation.¹⁹

There are articles demonstrating the unambiguousness of the usage of words like “peoples” or “tribes” in various sources. A few decades ago, Richard Tapper mentioned the problem of interdisciplinary studies in this field, and he emphasized that historians and philologists translate and interpret words like “qabīla,” “ṭā’ifa,” “qawm” as tribes many times but without knowing how they were actually used by the authors.²⁰ To my knowledge, there is also no comprehensive study examining the terms mentioned in various sources and originating from different regions, like the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, or Central Asia. However, in the field of Oriental studies, recently some articles raised this issue concerning interpretations of tribe in written sources from the perspective of the representation of communities,²¹ or they examined the terms used to designate nomadic peoples.²² In a recent article, Johann Heiss and Eirik Hovden analyzed and compared the terms describing tribes or social groups in al-‘Alawī’s (ninth-tenth century) and al-Hamadhānī’s (tenth century) works, and they found that al-‘Alawī used mostly the term “‘ashīra” when speaking of tribes or groups of peoples, while interestingly, this word is not found in al-Hamadhānī’s genealogical work. They highlighted that al-‘Alawī was of north Arabian origin, while al-Hamadhānī belonged to the south Arabian peoples, and

18 On the question in general see: Sneath, *The Headless State. Aristocratic orders, kinship society & misrepresentations of nomadic Inner Asia*. He has an exchange with Golden about this problem: Golden, “Review of the Headless State” and Sneath, “REJOINDERS. A Response by David Sneath to Peter Golden’s Review of *The Headless State*,” Ayimag, *uymaq and baylik*,” 161, and 176–81. For the review of Sneath’s book see Kradin, “The Headless State.”

19 Atwood, “Mongols, Arabs, Kurds, and Franks: Rashīd al-Dīn’s Comparative Ethnography of Tribal Society,” 227–28. ff. 17.

20 Tapper, “Anthropologists, Historians.”

21 See for example the articles published as part of the *Visions of Community* project: Morony, “Religious Communities in the Early Islamic World,” or Heiss and Hovden, “The Political Usage.”

22 See for example Paul, *op. cit.*; Leder, “Nomaden und nomadische Lebensformen in arabischer Begrifflichkeit.”

this may have been one of the reasons why they used different terms to describe various social groups.²³ The general use of group-identifying terms in the case of Turkic or other peoples differs significantly from this, and I would like to add some examples from the Arabic sources describing Turkic peoples and point out some difficulties concerning the translations of group-identifying terms. Of course, it is impossible to understand how Turks identified themselves on the basis of the Arabic sources, as these sources are external and they depict these peoples mostly as nomads, barbarians, or infidels,²⁴ but this could be the subject of another paper.

Jins

In the medieval Arabic sources, one finds many terms designating Turkic peoples, such as *jins*, *umma*, *qawm*, *qabīla*, and *ṭāʾifa*. The lexicons of Régis Blachère or Edward William Lane or even simply Ibn al-Manẓūr's dictionary give a good idea of the diversity of meanings of these words. The most common word one finds in these descriptions of nomadic Turkic peoples is *jins*. This term basically means a kind or class within a higher-order thing, for example in the case of animals and peoples:

”*al-ḍarbu min kulli shāʾ yin, wa huwa min al-nāsi wa min al-ṭayri...*”

”[this word means the] kind of everything, such as the [kind of] people or birds...”

In this sense, the modern Arabic dictionary later also gives “nation” as one possible meaning. *Jins* might be a loanword from the Greek *γένος* and Latin *genus* (though these terms do not have the same meaning), and it usually refers to a species within a genus.²⁵ “*Jins*” can also refer to pagan or barbarous peoples, or other ethnic groups.²⁶ If one takes a closer look at the geographical sources, one sees that the term “*jins*” can designate smaller or larger groups of people, including Turks, Chinese, Indian peoples, or Slavs:

”*jinsun min al-turk*,” [they are] a kind of Turkic peoples;

23 Heiss and Hovden, “The Political Usage.”

24 In general, see Frenkel, “The Turks of the Eurasian Steppes.”

25 Van den Bergh, “*Jins*,” 550; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* I, 470; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* II, 383.

26 Blachère, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais* I/1783; Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* I/470. The term is used mostly in this sense in the geographical and travel literature, see later, for example in the case of the Khazars (see note 82).

“*ajnāsi al-turk*,” groups of Turkic peoples;
 “*jinsun min al-saqāliba*,” a kind/group of Slavic peoples;
 “*wa ajnāsun min al-turk badū yusammūna al-w.l.n.d.riyya*,”²⁷ and [some] kinds of the nomadic Turks called al-w.l.n.d.riyya

This word is translated many times as race²⁸ or tribe, but the word race should not be used anymore, especially in these kinds of translations, and “jins” usually denoted a group or kind of peoples, which is very common in the geographical literature. For example, al-Mas‘ūdī (†H 345/956) writes the following in his *Kitāb al-tanbīh*:

The fifth group of peoples (*ummatun*)²⁹ consists of [various] kinds of Turkic peoples (*ajnās al-turk*), and among them are the *kh.r.l.khiyya*, the *ghuz* and *kimāk*, and the *tughuzghuz* and the *khazar*. [The *Khazars*] are called *sabir* in Turkish and *al-khazarān* in Persian, and they are a kind of Turkic peoples (*jinsun min al-turk*) who are settled [people], and their name was Arabized. It is related that the *Khazars* and other [kinds of Turkic peoples] have one common language, and they have one king.³⁰

As one sees, the term “jins” refers here to a larger group or a kind of Turkic peoples. At the same time, in the work of al-Marwazī, V. Minorsky translated the word “jins” in some places as tribes, but it is possible that the author meant tribes:

“*wa ‘an al-yasār al-Šin ‘indā maṭlā‘i al-shamsi al-ṣayfi khalqun kathīratun fīmā bayna al-Šin wa al-khirkhīz wa hum ajnāsun labā asāmin mithla Abrmr (?), Hwrnyr (?), Tūlmān (?), Frāhṅklī (?), Yāthī (?), Hynāthī (?), Būbū‘nī (?), B.nkū (?), Fūrī (?).*”

“To the left of China towards the summer sunrise, between China and the Kyrgyz, there is a large population. They are tribes with names such as *Abrmr* (?), *Hwrnyr* (?), *Tūlmān* (?), *Frāhṅklī* (?), *Yāthī* (?), *Hynāthī* (?), *Būbū‘nī* (?), *B.nkū* (?), *Fūrī* (?).” (Trans. by Minorsky)

27 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 180. The word al-w.l.n.d.riyya is in itself a problem, see Czeglédy, “A IX. századi magyar történelem főbb kérdései,” 38–47.

28 Bang and Marquart, *Osttürkische Dialektstudien*, 142; Ibn Faḍlān, *Rihla* 35*; translation on 80; *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr* III, 222. See also Zsidai and Langó, “Kunok és alánok,” 425, 429; Frenkel, *The Turkic Peoples in Medieval Arabic Writings*, 42.

29 The word *umma* can be translated as community or nation too, but I do not think that in this case this would be appropriate. See more on the word “*umma*” later in this article.

30 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 83. Based on this edition, other variations of names in these MSs include *al-hūl.hiyya*, *al-kh.w.l.kh..yya*, *al-ṭ‘ar.gh.y.s.y.r* or *b.sh.r*.

V. Minorsky noted that the transcription of these names is conventional and cannot be relied upon, but this is another problem concerning the interpretation of the sources related to the history of these peoples.³¹

It is also hard to determine what kind of social or relational connection this word had. An interesting example of the use of term “jins” is found in the work of Ibn al-Athīr (†1233), in which he contends that the Tatars wanted to ally with the Kipchaks against the Alans in 1222, and they based their argument on the “fact” that they and the Kipchaks originated from the same “jins”, but the Alans did not. As one later sees, the Tatars used this only as a reason to attack the Kipchaks.³² Here the word “jins” seems to refer to a kind of kinship connection between the Kipchaks and the Tatars, but we know little of this, and in the end, obviously, it meant nothing to the Tatars. Emphasis in this case can be placed rather on the argument itself: how did they make friends out of their enemies, and how did they use this during the negotiations?

Umma

Another term which is often found as a designation of different kinds of peoples is the plural of word *umma*: *umamun*. The word “umma” refers primarily to the Muslim religious community, but of course, it can have different meanings in various sources. Michael Cooperson examined uses of the term “umma” on the basis of al-Mas‘ūdī’s work. He suggests that the term was used to denote peoples, nations, or communities as well, and its attributes were in flux. If one is speaking of larger communities, such as nations, one could mention the Persians, the Byzantines, the Chinese peoples, Turks etc. among the major *umam* of the ancient world in the historical and geographical literature. Cooperson also assumes that al-Mas‘ūdī was well aware of the difficulties of the reconstruction of each *umma*’s history.³³ Heiss and Hovden concluded that in the singular, “umma” meant mostly the universal Muslim community, and in the plural (*umamun*) referred to the many peoples from different part of the world and among them to the Muslim community’s pagan and heterodox enemies. They give an example from al-Idrīsī’s (†1165) work, in which the author used this term to designate peoples along the East African coast or the Turkic peoples

31 al-Marwazī, *Sharaf al-ṣaman*, 14* and 26 (I use V. Minorsky’s translation). On the difficulties concerning the Arabic vowels which are not marked in these texts, see for example Ormos, “A magyar őstörténet arab forrásainak újabb irodalma,” 743–45.

32 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil* XI, 385.

33 Cooperson, “‘Arabs’ and ‘Iranians’: The Uses of Ethnicity in the Early Abbasid Period,” 376–77.

of Central Asia.³⁴ One finds instances of this in other sources too, for example when we read the following about the Turkic peoples in al-Marwazī's work:

"wa minhum kibirhiḡ wa hum ummatun kathīratun," and among [the Turks] there are the Kyrgyz people, who are a great people"
"wa 'alā yamin hā'ulāi al-kimākīya thalāthu umamin ya'abudūna al-nayyirān wa'l miyāba" and on the right side of these Kimeks, there are three kinds of peoples who adore the sun and the moon and the waters"³⁵ (Trans. by Minorsky)

It is worth noting that he uses the words "umam" and "ajnās" (i.e. as plural forms) quite often, but it is not clear what the difference is between these terms exactly. In another passage, al-Mas'ūdī mentions the Burtās people as *"ummatun 'aẓīmatun min al-turk,"* or "a community or group from the Turkic peoples."³⁶ As one can see, this word denoted primarily larger or smaller groups of peoples out of the Muslim communities in terms of Turkic peoples.

Qawm

The other term designating larger or smaller groups is *qawm* or *aqwām* in the plural. This word can be found in an array of geographical works. For example, al-Marwazī mentions the Magyars as *"qawmun min al-turk,"* or "the Majgharī are a Turkish people" in V. Minorsky's translation, which is the same in Ibn Rusta's work, though he refers to them as a "jins", not as a "qawm".³⁷ In another passage, he writes about the Pechenegs:

"wa'l-bajnākīyya qawmun sayyāratun," or "the Pechenegs are wandering people."³⁸ Ibn Faḍlān also uses this term in his work: *"baladu qawmin*

34 Heiss and Hovden, "The Political Usage," 63.

35 al-Marwazī, *Sharaf al-ẓamān*, 18*; 20*; 30; 32.

36 al-Mas'ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 62. The Burtās people lived between the lands of Khwarezm and the lands of the Khazars.

37 al-Marwazī, *Sharaf al-ẓamān*, *22; 35. Most probably, they used the same source for the description of the Magyars. Historians tend to avoid discussing the sources of these descriptions. On the so-called Jayhānī tradition see: Göckenjan and Zimonyi, "Orientalische Berichte über die Völker Osteuropas und Zentralasiens im Mittelalter. For a relevant critique of their work see Ormos, *A magyar őstörténet*; "Kiegészítések 'A magyar őstörténet arab forrásainak újabb irodalma. Kmoskó Mihály, Hansgerd Göckenjan és Zimonyi István művei' című írásomhoz" and "Remarks on the Islamic sources on the Hungarians in the ninth and tenth centuries."

38 al-Marwazī, *Sharaf al-ẓamān*, *20; 32.

min al-atrak yuqālu lahum al-bāshghird,” or “the land of a kind of Turkic peoples called Bashkirs.”³⁹

Qabīla

There are other words which the authors used primarily to refer to smaller groups of peoples, such as tribes. One of these words is *qabīla* (in the plural *qabā'ilu*). As Heiss and Hovden highlight, this is not a term denoting exclusively Arabs, though one finds other mentions of non-Arab peoples, mainly in travelers' accounts, in which they write about non-Arab-or Islamic lands.⁴⁰ This is the case with the Turkic peoples too. For example, Ibn Faḍlān refers to the Oghuz peoples as “tribes”: “*qabilatun min al-atrak yu'rifūna bi'l-ghuzzīya,*” or “a tribe of Turkic peoples known as Oghuz.”⁴¹ He also mentions the tribes of infidel peoples:

“fa-baynakum wa bayna hadhā al-baladi alladhi tadbkurūna alfu qabilatin min al-kuffār, or “and between you and the land, which you have mentioned, there are one thousand tribes of infidels.”⁴²

But this word can be found in many other works too, including for instance Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī's description:

“wa Yājūj wa Mājūj arb'a wa 'isbrūna qabilatan fa-kānat qabilatun minhum al-ghuzz wa hum al-turk,” or “And Gog and Magog had 24 tribes (?) and there was a tribe (?) among them, the Oghuz, and they are the Turks.”⁴³

Ṭā'ifa

Another term which was widely used to designate tribes in the Arabic sources is *ṭā'ifa* (pl. *ṭawa'ifu*). This basically means a part of something (“*juḡ'un min al-shay'i*”) and also a group of people (“*jama'atun min al-nāsi*”) numbering less than one thousand,⁴⁴ and in this sense, as since it designates a smaller group of peoples, the word can be translated as tribe. This word describes many groups of peoples or tribes in the Middle East and Central Asia, and it has been studiously analyzed in the anthropological scholarship. For example, the term “qawm” and “ṭā'ifa” are widely used today in Iran and Afghanistan and they can refer to various

39 Ibn Faḍlān, *Rihla*, *18; 35. Z. V. Togan translates this as Turkic peoples (“Dann hielten wir uns im Lande eines Türkenvolkes auf, das Basghird genannt wird.”).

40 Heiss and Hovden, “The Political Usage,” 69.

41 Ibn Faḍlān, *Rihla*, *10; 19.

42 Ibid., *6, 11.

43 Ibn al-Faqīh, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 298–99.

44 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab* VIII, 223.

levels of the social organization of a group of peoples like tribes, groups, and the like.⁴⁵

This word can denote Turkic peoples in the Arabic geographical literature, for example in al-Bīrūnī's or Ibn Faḍlān's works:

"wa ḥawlahu (al-baḥr al-kbaḥar) ṭawā'ifu min al-turk wa-al-rūs wa-al-ṣaqlab,"
or "and around the (Caspian Sea) dwell groups of the Turkic, Rūs and
Slavic peoples";⁴⁶
"wa ra'yānā ṭā'ifatan minhum ta'budu al-ḥayyāta wa ṭā'ifatan ta'budu al-samaka
wa ṭā'ifatan ta'budu al-karākīya," or "and we saw a group of them, which
worshipped the snake, a group, which worshipped the fish, and [another
] group, which worshipped the cranes."⁴⁷

Thus, this term can refer to tribes or different kinds of peoples in the sense of the Arabic word *naḥ'* at the same time.

Other Terms and the Problems of Interpretations

There are other words like "jīl" which can also stand for smaller or larger groups of people or tribes, but it is only rarely used in descriptions of the Turkic peoples. Blachère suggested it refers primarily to larger groups of peoples, like the Chinese, the Turks, etc. as is mentioned in Ibn Manẓūr's dictionary,⁴⁸ but Lane found that "jīl" can also refer to tribes, and in al-Kāshgharī's *Dīwān* one finds the same assertion, although no Turkic word is given as an equivalent of this term.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that the term *'ashīra* (pl. *'ashā'ir*), which can denote smaller sub-tribes of *qabīla*,⁵⁰ is rarely used in the sources to denote Turkic peoples, and indeed I myself have not seen it used once to denote Turkic peoples.

On the basis of the examples mentioned above, one can conclude that the translation of these words can be very difficult and uncertain, which means that ultimately the translation is an interpretation of the terms. One comes across several examples of this when reading about the history of the Eurasian Steppe, because in the sources there are various words which are consistently

45 Orywall, *Die Ethnischen Gruppen Afghanistan*, 78–80; Tapper, "Anthropologists, Historians," xvi–xviii.

46 al-Bīrūnī, *al-Kanūn al-Mas'ūdī*, 4.

47 Ibn Faḍlān, *Rihla*, *19; 36.

48 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān* II, 436. e.g. the Turks, the Chinese, the Arabs, the *Rūms* (Byzantines).

49 *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais*, III, 1984–85; Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, I, 494; Dankoff, "Kāshgharī on the tribal and kinship organization of the Turks," 30–31.

50 Lecerf, "'Ashīra."

translated as tribe. For instance, there is a fascinating article about the people of Nūkarda, and there are some places where the translations of “tribes” are confusing. The author, Turkologist Peter Golden, translates both “jins”⁵¹ and “jīl” as tribe.⁵² However, if one takes a closer look at the given text, one sees that these words could denote larger groups of peoples, or at least they could refer to different kinds of peoples that were described by al-Mas‘ūdī there. “*al-jīlu al-amwalu minhum yuqālu labum bajnā, thummā yalīhi ummatun thāniyatun yuqālu labā bajghird, thumma yalīhā ummatun yuqālu labā bajnāk ... talihā ummatun ukbrā yuqālu labā Nūkarda.*” He translates this as follows: “The first tribe is called bajnā. Near to them is the second people, who are called bajghird, and near them is a people, the bajnāk, ... near them is the last of these peoples, the Nūkarda.”⁵³ I would venture the contention that it is not immediately obvious that, when using the word “jīl”, he meant tribe, as the text is a listing of the peoples living in the Caucasus. The other thing is that *ummatun ukbrā* does not mean the last of these peoples, but rather can be translated as follows: “[they are followed by] another [group of] peoples called Nūkarda.”⁵⁴ One notices the same thing if one also reads the translation of *amwā‘* (kinds, sorts, species) as tribes,⁵⁵ though they do not have this meaning.⁵⁶ Here the author quotes al-Mas‘ūdī’s historical work, in which he mentioned the Black Sea: “*al-burghār wa al-rūs wa bajnāk, bajghird wa hum thalāthatu amwā‘in min al-turk.*”⁵⁷ He translates as follows: “The Burghar, the Rus, the *Pacānā, the Pācānak and the Bajghird, (the latter) are three tribes of the Turks.”⁵⁸ The word *naw‘* cannot mean tribe here, so they are three kinds of Turkic peoples. Moreover, al-Mas‘ūdī wrote about the Baḥr Nītas in the first instance, describing them as the sea of the people of Burghar, the Rus, the *Pajānā, the Pājānak, and the Bajghird. Golden, however, assumes that he is speaking of three tribal organizations.⁵⁹ I would suggest that the

51 Golden, “The people Nūkarda,” 23.

52 Ibid., 22–23. One finds the same translations of these terms in an article in which he translates a passage from al-Ya‘qūbī’s *Kitāb al-buldān* about the Kimeks’ state (or stateless) organization: *jins* and the plural form *ajnas* are translated consistently as “tribe” and “tribes.” Golden, “The Qipčaq of Medieval Eurasia: An Example of Stateless Adaptation in the Steppes,” 144.

53 Golden, “The people Nūkarda,” 22.

54 The word *ukbrā* is the feminine of the word *akbar*. The word which stems from the same root (*a.kh.r*) and means “last” is *ākhir* or *ākhiratun* in the feminine, which is not the case here.

55 Ibid., 24. and 34.

56 See e. g. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* XIV, 330. *Akbaṣṣu min al-jinsi*.

57 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj* I, 262.

58 Golden, “The people Nūkarda,” 34.

59 “*annā baḥra al-burghār (in Pellat’s edition: al-B.r.gb.z) wa ar-rūs wa bajnāk, bajghird wa hum thalāthatu amwā‘in min al-turk...wa huwa baḥr Nītas.*” al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj* I, 262.

sentence should be translated as follows: “And as the astrologers from among the holder of astrological tables and other [astrologers] among the elders say, the sea of al-Bulghar and al-Rūs [and B.j.nā and B.j.n.āk and Bgh.r.d—and they are three kinds of the Turkic peoples] is the Sea of Nīt.sh. (the Black Sea)”⁶⁰ Adding to this, al-Mas‘ūdī mentions the Burghar as a kind of Slavic people using the term “naw‘” (*naw‘ min al-Ṣaqālība*) in his geographical description, which does not denote tribes there.⁶¹ Finally, in the same article there is a sentence in which one finds the word “jins”, but it has not been translated at all.⁶² The article is still highly valuable, but the translator thus can confuse the reader, even if he also correctly noted later, in another passage, that he is uncertain as to how to translate the word “jins”.⁶³ In the recent translations of excerpts about Turkic peoples in the Arabic sources, Frenkel found the translation of these group-identifying words as hard as in the case of Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamadhānī’s work.⁶⁴

In conclusion, how these terms are translated is important. If one examines the history of the Steppe peoples, it does matter whether they are referred to as peoples or tribes, especially if one seeks to analyze their state/tribal organization.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, in most cases one does not find descriptions of these terms that are as detailed and clear as the ones found in the Arabic-Turkish

60 For a good summary of the history of the Black Sea and the Azov Sea in the geographical literature see Kovács, “A Macotis ingoványai.”

61 al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 141.

62 “*wa qad dhakarnā fi Kitāb Junūni al-ma‘ārifa wa mā jarā fi al-dubūr al-sawālifa al-sababa fi intiqāli hadhibi al-ajnasī al-arb‘ati min al-turk‘ an al-mashriq wa mā kāna baynabum wa bayna al-ghuzziyyati wa’l-kharlukiiyyati wa’l-kimakiyyati min al-hurub wa’l-gharāt ‘alā al-buhayrati al-Jurjāniyyati.*” Golden, op. cit., 23; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh*, 180–81. Golden translates this as follows: “We have mentioned in (our) *Book of the Science of What Happened in Ages Past* the reason for the movement of the Turks from the East and what occurred between them and the *Oğuz, *Qarluq and Kimäk, of the wars and raids around the Sea of Jurjan.” But in fact here al-Mas‘ūdī spoke of four kinds of Turkic peoples (*al-ajnasī al-arb‘ati min at-turk‘*), which he mentioned at the beginning of this passage, namely the *Bajnāk, *Bajnā, the *Bajghird, and the *Nūkbarda (?). This passage is interpreted by Zimonyi as al-Mas‘ūdī shows here the fighting between the Oghuz, Qarluq, Kimek, and the Pechenegs as a cause of the western migration of the early Hungarians and Pechenegs. Zimonyi, “A besenyők nyugatra vándorlásának okai,” 135. On Zimonyi’s works in general see: Ormos, op. cit. Based on the poor philological examination and the uncertainty of the identification of these Turkic peoples/tribes, I find no evidence in support of Zimonyi’s conclusions. Moreover, the work he mentions is lost, so we have no other works on which to draw unless other sources are found. Zsidai, “Ismā‘īl ibn Aḥmad.”

63 Golden, “The Turkic World in Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī,” 503, note 3.

64 Frenkel, *The Turkic Peoples*, 42.

65 As Golden also notes in his article “[a]s it is not infrequent in steppe history, where sources are scarce and speculation abundant, a number of potential solutions present themselves.” Golden, “The people Nūkbarda,” 34. For the usage of lineage in imperial politics, see also Atwood 2013.

dictionary of al-Kāshghārī, in which he describes them quite precisely.⁶⁶ On the basis of the abovementioned examples, and because these words denote tribes or particular fluid social groups, I would like to argue that we should use “jins”, “qabīla”, “qawm”, or “tā’ifa” etc. as group-identifying terms more cautiously in the wider context of the early medieval world of the Eurasian Steppe. Moreover, one also has to consider that it is not possible to apply “modern” (or Western) terms like nation for the description of the communities of the medieval (and eastern) Steppe. With regards to the Arabic sources, Heiss and Hovden have recommended further comparisons and analyses of various texts from different regions in a historical context which would be based on source criticism.⁶⁷ I can only highlight the importance of their suggestion as it concerns the sources on the Turkic peoples of the Eurasian steppe.

The Ethnonym Turk and Problems with Its Use

In the following, I raise the problem of the interpretation of the ethnonym Turk. Narratives of early Hungarian history (i.e. the period before the eleventh century) offer many examples of the problems with the use of this term because of the scarcity of sources and also because the early Hungarians were nomadic, so they were mentioned as Turks not only in the Islamic sources but very often in Latin and Greek sources too. Studies on the so-called Turkic peoples are popular, but there are few works and little research on the history of the Turks which rely on the Arabic sources before and by the time of early Islam because this period of the Turkic people’s history is poorly documented. The problem has been discussed in the international research,⁶⁸ however, and it is clearly important to consider carefully how the sources use the term “Turk”

66 For example al-Kāshghārī has used *qabila* for tribes and *butūn* for subtribes: al-Kāshghārī, *Divān*, 27. For a detailed description of the tribal organizations of al-Kāshghārī see Dankoff, “Kāshghārī on the tribal and kinship organization of the Turks.”

67 Heiss and Hovden, “The Political Usage.”

68 See for example: Marquart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, 46; Gibb, *The Arab conquests in Central Asia*, 9–10; Bosworth, “The Turks in the Islamic Lands,” especially 196–205; Vásáry, *A régi Belső-Ázsia története*, 151–52; Lewiczki, “The Oldest Mentions of the Turks in Arabic Literature”; Sinor, “The establishment and dissolution of the Türk Empire”; Harmatta and Maróth, “Zur Geschichte der arabisch-türkischen Beziehungen,” 139–44.

(i.e. to which groups of people or peoples do they apply it).⁶⁹ If one only takes the English translation of al-Ṭabarī's chronicle (*Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*) into account, one will have difficulties regarding the identification of "Turks."⁷⁰ Apart from the chronicle of al-Ṭabarī, one could also mention the case of the Khalaj Turks. According to an article by Miklós Maróth, who examined this question on the basis of the al-Balkhī tradition, the Khalaj Turks lived between the steppe of al-Dāwar and Ghazna. Maróth agrees with al-Khwārizmī's conclusion that they were the descendants of the Hephthalites if it was true that the Hephthalites were Turkic.⁷¹ But this assumption is related to the problem of the Hephthalites (*hayātila* in the Arabic sources), which is another interesting subject of debate among scholars at the moment.⁷²

With respect to early Hungarian history, which is strongly connected to the history of the Eurasian Steppe, unfortunately in some cases it is far from clear that a given source which mentions "Turks" has any connection to the history of the early Magyars, and this raises the problem of "Turk" as an ethnonym,

69 See for example the case of the ghuz-toghuzoghuz problem and the misinterpretation of ethnonyms after Barthold, in general see for example: Vásáry, *A régi Belső-Ázsia története*, 82–84.

70 For example the case of Balanjar's siege in the North Caucasus region in Hijra 32 / A. D. 652–53, when the Turks joined the inhabitants of Balanjar against the Muslims. The translator, S. Humphreys, assumes that the term "Turks" probably refers to the elite who lived under Khazar rule. *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (XV, 95. Note 167). At another place, where al-Ṭabarī writes about Nizāk Tarkhān in 51/671, M. G. Morony notes that he should be the Hephthalite ruler of Bādghīs, and the Turks mentioned here may be Hephthalites from Bādghīs and the surrounding area. *Ibid.* (XVIII, 163. Note 488 and 164. Note 489). Or see Sijistan's conquest (79/697–698), when 'Ubaydallah b. Abī Bakra attacked Zunbil and its Turkish troops were forced to withdraw from one territory after another, until they reached the region of Zābulistan. E. K. Rowson pointed out the same problem here. *Ibid.* (XXII, 183–84. Note 662). Another good example is an article written by J. Harmatta and M. Maróth in which they analyze the Arabic-Turkic contacts in the beginning of the eighth century, and their conclusions were drawn on the basis of the Arabic and Persian sources as well. They came to the conclusion that the "Turks" were mentioned three times near each other in al-Ṭabarī's (†923) chronicle, referred to in it as three different tribes or tribal alliances. According to their research, the Turks who lived in 701 A. D. near Kishsh were western Turks, the Turks who were fighting against Kutayba ibn Muslim in 707 A. D. were most probably eastern Turks, and the Turks who attacked the people of Samarqand during the Arab siege in 711 A. D. were western Turks from Shāsh and Ferghana. Harmatta and Maróth, "Zur Geschichte der arabisch-türkischen Beziehungen."

71 Maróth, "Die Xalaj in den arabischen Quellen," 271–72.

72 On the question of Turks and Hephthalites in general see Bivar, "Hayātila." K. Enoki thinks that al-Ṭabarī distinguished the Hephthalites from the Turks when writing about Turks at the time of Bahrām Jūr, and the Turks who invaded Persia were a non-Persian tribe living northwest of the Persian territory. It is remarkable that he examined the historical background as well. Enoki, *Studia Asiatica*, 149). Recently see Vaissière, "Is There a 'Nationality' of the Hephthalites?"

too.⁷³ One example is found in an interesting passage in Ibn Rusta's work, which derives from Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā, who lived in Constantinople and described the Byzantine Empire and its neighbors. The passage in question goes back to the second half or the end of the ninth century. Hārūn ibn Yaḥyā mentions Turks as guards of the emperor.⁷⁴ On the basis of an analysis of the *De administrando imperio* (DAI), which was edited by Emperor Constantine VII of Byzantium (913–59) in the middle of the tenth century, and the work of Ibn Rusta, Joseph Marquart concluded that these Turks were Turks from Ferghana (*Φαργάνοι*). However, he quoted another passage from the DAI in which the term “Turks” (*Τοῦρκοι*) refers to the Turks of Ferghana, the Khazars, and other soldiers who might have been Hungarians.⁷⁵ Some historians have concluded that this fragment refers clearly to the early Hungarians, but I do not see any clear evidence in support of this conclusion.⁷⁶

Another example of the misinterpretation of ethnonyms is the case of Samanid Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad's raids against Taraz in 893. Al-Tabarī's account of this event is mentioned in the historical sources on the Hungarian conquest because some of the Hungarian historians and archaeologists thought it was this raid which caused the Pechenegs' raid against the Hungarians, which may

73 On the problem of the ethnonym Turk in general see Sinor, “Reflections on the History and Historiography of the Nomad Empires of Central Eurasia,” 3–6; Zsidai, “Turkok az arab forrásokban”; Golden, “The Turkic World in Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī,” 503–04; Vásáry, “Hungarians and Mongols as ‘Turks’. On the applicability of Ethnic Names.”

74 Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq an-naḥīsiya*, 121. Zsidai, “Turkok az arab forrásokban,” 8–9, recently Vásáry, *A régi Belső-Ázsia története*, 539.

75 Marquart, *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge*, 227; see also: Vasiliev, “Harun-ibn-Yahya and his description of Constantinople.”

76 Vásáry and Zimonyi thought that the phrase Turks from Ferghana referred to the Hungarians, but later he was more cautious and said that it was very likely that they were Hungarians because the Greek sources mention the Hungarians as Turks (Kristó, ed., *A honfoglalás korának írott forrásai*, 28, note 32; Kmoskó, “Mohamedán írók a steppe népeiről,” 185, note 738). I assume that at the moment we cannot determine with certainty which people they might have been, and in my view Zimonyi's argument is unreliable on this point, so I agree instead with Marquart, because he examined the source in detail. Unfortunately, there are minor mistakes in the Hungarian translation of the passage. On the question of the translation of this fragment, see Zsidai, “Turkok az arab forrásokban,” 8–9. The question of Byzantine uses of the ethnonym Turk is complex, and the meanings with which the term is used depend mostly on the given source and its context and criticism. Sinor thought that in the Byzantine sources, the name Turk referred mostly to the Turkish speaking peoples, and there are some exceptions when this name was applied to the Hungarians, but this is not the case here. About the Hungarian-Turk question as raised by Sinor, see: Sinor, “The Outlines of Hungarian Prehistory,” 517–24.

have prompted the Hungarians to migrate into the Carpathian Basin in 896.⁷⁷ If one takes a closer look at the sources, however, one sees that al-Mas'ūdī's work, in which he wrote more about the raids and fights on these territories, unfortunately has been lost, and no sources have been found describing this raid as the starting point of an eastern-western migration of the Karlukhs towards the Oghuz people who dwelled near the Aral Sea. Instead, according to the sources, part of the Karlukh people moved to Kasghar, and this city lies not to the west, but to the southeast of Taraz. Moreover, if we look at the map of this raid as it is reconstructed in the secondary literature, there is no clear explanation why Bukhara would have been the starting point of the raid. Al-Narshakhī writes that the Samanid emir returned to Bukhara with the captives and booty, but there is no mention in any of the sources of the specific site from where the raid was launched, so in all likelihood, this argument was based only on the fact that Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad was the emir of Bukhara by that time.⁷⁸ Unfortunately, the abovementioned problems of translation and interpretation notwithstanding, one of the most important migration hypothesis concerning the early Hungarians is based on this argument. After having studied the related sources, however, I have come to the conclusion that we cannot consider this raid the starting point of a greater migration, at least not in the case of the Hungarian conquest. Rather, it was in all probability an important event in a longer border fight between the pagan Turkic/Nomadic peoples and the Caliphate. These fights are important from the perspective of the history of the steppe, and I find Deborah G. Tor's argument interesting. Tor contends that there are not many notes on these raids against the Turks because these fights resulted in great losses and deficits for the Caliphate.⁷⁹ Whatever the truth is, it would be worthwhile to reevaluate our sources with regards to the Arabic conquest of Central Asia as well. Apart from the problems of the sources on the early history of the Hungarians, the use of ethnonyms is confusing in other texts too. Sometimes, a name does not refer to a people but rather to the territory where they live, for example al-Iṣṭakhrī mentioned the name Burtās (who were

77 On this question in general see Szabados, "A magyarok bejövételének hadtörténeti szempontú újraértékelése."

78 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta' rikh* XIII, 2249; al-Mas' ūdī, *Murij*, IV, 245; Ibn Miskawayh, *Tajārib* IV, 360; al-Narshakhī, *Ta' rikh-i Bukhara* 84; Mirkhond, *Histoire*, 6; Summary of the sources and the event: Zsidai, "Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad."

79 Tor, "The Islamization of Central Asia in the Sāmānid era and the reshaping of the Muslim world," 291–92.

described by al-Masʿūdī as ‘Turkic peoples as well’)⁸⁰ as an “umma” and later as “nāhiye”: “Burtās is the name of a region (*nāhiya*), like the Rūs, and the Khazar and the Sarīr, which are all the names of countries (*mamlaka*) and not the names of cities or peoples.”⁸¹ However, the term Khazar was used to denote peoples in the beginning of the same work: “as regards Khazar, it is the name of this kind of peoples (*innahu ismun li-badhibi al-jinsi min al-nāsi*).”⁸² Claus Schönig has also noted the ambiguousness of term ‘Turk’ in al-Kāshgharī’s *Dīwān*, and he concludes that the term ‘Turk’ denoted 1) the ‘Turkic people as a whole, 2) the non-Oghuz peoples (in remarks on the Oghuz dialect), and 3) a part of the core population of the Karakhanid state, i.e. the Čigil.”⁸³

Further examples of the use of the term “Turks” could be listed, but they would not add to the core argument of my inquiry. Another important factor is the question of the “Turkicization” and Islamization of the territory where “Turks” had lived earlier. A decade ago, Sören Stark published a book which examined this question from the perspectives of archaeology and history,⁸⁴ and in a later article he noted a problem concerning the early ‘Turkic archaeological material and the interaction between the inhabitants of early medieval pre-Muslim Transoxania. He also noted that, “[t]he actual status of these earliest influences [viz. the middle of the first millennium A.D.] from the ‘Turkish steppes in Transoxania is still poorly understood and consequently a matter of considerable dispute between archaeologists, historians and linguists.”⁸⁵ In conclusion, each use of the term “Turk” must be interpreted in a wider historical and geographical context, and it is obviously not easy to define which kinds of ‘Turkic peoples were described in the chronicles or the geographical descriptions. Hence, as noted above, historians must be careful with the translations of these ethnonyms.⁸⁶ The term “Turk” can refer to various kinds of peoples and also tribes, subtribes, or clans, which are mainly nomadic in the Arabic sources. Historians must also keep in mind that the term does not have anything to do

80 al-Masʿūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbih*, 62. “wa Burtās ummatun ‘azīmatun min al-turk bayna bilād Khwārazm wa mamlakat al-khazar”

81 al-Istakhri, *Kitāb Masālik wa’l-mamālik*, 220, 223, 225.

82 On the use of the term Khazars as the name of peoples see *ibid.*, 10.

83 Schönig, “On some unclear, doubtful and contradictory passages in Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī’s “*Dīwān Luḡāt at-Turk*,” 35–38.

84 Stark, *Die Alttürkenzeit in Mittel-und Zentralasien*.

85 Stark, “Mercenaries and City Rulers: Early Turks in pre-Muslim Mawarannahr,” 307.

86 Zsidai, “Turkok az arab forrásokban.” Recently I. Vásáry has also raised this question in a short article. Vásáry, “Hungarians and Mongols.”

with the ethnicity in itself, especially if we speak of the early medieval history of the Steppe.

In my assessment, further study of the uses of ethnonyms like “Turk” is necessary, as is further study of the migration of early nomadic peoples in the historical context of the Eurasian Steppe. This question is interesting not only from the perspective of early Hungarian history, but also as regards the early medieval history of the Steppe. There is still room left for Orientalists, Antropologists and Historians in this field of these studies.

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*Ethnonyms in Europe and Asia:
Studies in History and Anthropology*

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